



CVID: Does Everyone Agree? by Ralph A. Cossa

North Korea has agreed to participate in a six-party working group meeting on May 12 in Beijing to help lay the groundwork for the third session of the more senior-level six-party talks (among North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the U.S.) which are anticipated before the end of June. The six had agreed “in principle” at the second plenary in Beijing in late February to establish a working group to help with preparations for future plenary meetings, although no terms of reference were established and it remains unclear just what the working group will actually work on.

Washington has said that its position remains unchanged as it goes into these working-level talks: it seeks the “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” of North Korea’s suspected nuclear weapons programs, or CVID for short. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, who heads the U.S. delegation at the plenary sessions, recently told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “that acronym and the important goal it represents [have] been accepted by all but the North Koreans.”

While it is true that all parties (including North Korea) profess to seek a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula and the others (less North Korea) at least pay lip serve to the CVID objective, it is not clear all agree on the definition of its components. Nor has Washington been real specific as to what CVID fully entails.

Washington has made it clear that “complete” means both plutonium and uranium enrichment-based programs. However, despite the highly publicized confession by the father of Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, A. Q. Khan, that he sold uranium enrichment equipment to North Korea, Pyongyang continues to deny having a uranium-based weapons program and several other members of the six-party process seem openly skeptical of Washington’s accusations (or more willing to disregard the evidence even if it might be true). Thus, it would appear that DPRK acknowledgment of a uranium enrichment program – and a willingness by the others to press Pyongyang on this point – must be the first order of business at the working group meeting if there is to be any hope for future progress.

“Verifiable” means just that. It has long been acknowledged that devising a verification regime intrusive enough to satisfy hardline skeptics will be no mean feat. This is why the “Libyan model” is potentially so important. As Secretary Kelly told the Congress, “the DPRK needs to make a strategic choice for transformed relations with the United States and the world – as other countries have done, including quite recently – to abandon all of its nuclear programs.” In case the reference was too subtle, Kelly later noted that he “discussed Libya’s example with our North Korean counterparts, and we hope they understand its significance.”

In truth, verification can only work if the North cooperates in turning in its hidden hardware (not to mentioned reprocessed plutonium). Taking an Iraqi-style “catch me if you can” approach seems unworkable.

(For its part, Pyongyang has been quick to point out that it is not Libya. Nonetheless, Libya’s decision to come clean about its WMD programs in return for subsequent economic and political benefits does provide a refreshing diplomatic alternative to the Iraq model for dealing with such problems.)

The definition of “irreversible” remains subject to the most interpretation. At a minimum, it would seem to require an end to all DPRK nuclear programs, including energy-associated efforts (both production and reprocessing), to guard against future backsliding. Pyongyang has at times intimated that its “peaceful nuclear energy program” might also be put on the bargaining table . . . if the price is right. Washington has argued that there is no “peaceful” program and has made no secret of its desire to avoid an Agreed Framework II or a revival of any light water reactor (LWR) programs, although it has yet to formally demand an end to all nuclear energy-related programs.

Finally, Washington sees “dismantlement” as an action, not as a future promise. Previously, it had dismissed North Korean “freeze” proposals, saying it would not reward North Korea for merely honoring past (broken) promises. However, a breakthrough now seems possible in this area, depending on how Pyongyang defines its current “reward for freeze” proposal. While U.S. incentives will only come after dismantlement begins – which is itself a step beyond the Bush administration’s “no rewards until dismantlement is complete” approach – Washington has indicated that it would not object to a South Korean plan to offer energy assistance to North Korea in return for a “complete and verifiable” freeze, as long as the freeze were identified as “a first step toward dismantlement.”

For any freeze proposal to work, however, it must encompass all of North Korea’s suspected nuclear weapons programs, both plutonium and uranium-based. It must also be accompanied by a return of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and monitoring devices to North Korea. Therefore, success at the May 12 working-level talks – like success at the more senior-level six-party talks that will hopefully follow before the end of June – continues to rest on North Korea becoming more forthcoming on the full extent of its nuclear programs, and for China, South Korea, and others to insist that any freeze be “complete and verifiable” before significant new rewards are provided to Pyongyang.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS. He can be reached at pacforum@hawaii.rr.com